

ORAL HISTORY T-0001
INTERVIEWEES: CHICK FINNEY AND MARTIN LUTHER
MACKAY
INTERVIEWER: IRENE CORTINOVIS
JAZZMAN PROJECT
APRIL 6, 1971

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Today is April 6, 1971 and this is Irene Cortinovis of the Archives of the University of Missouri. I have with me today Mr. Chick Finney and Mr. Martin L. MacKay who have agreed to make a tape recording with me for our Oral History Section. They are musicians from St. Louis of long standing and we are going to talk today about their early lives and also about their experiences on the music scene in St. Louis.

CORTINOVIS: First, I'll ask you a few questions, gentlemen. Did you ever play on any of the Mississippi riverboats, the J.S, The St. Paul or the President?

FINNEY: I never did play on any of those name boats, any of those that you just named, Mrs. Cortinovis, but I was a member of the St. Louis Crackerjacks and we played on kind of an unknown boat that went down the river to Cincinnati and parts of Kentucky. But I just can't think of the name of the boat, because it was a small boat. Do you need the name of the boat?

CORTINOVIS: No. I don't need the name of the boat.

FINNEY: Mrs. Cortinovis, this is Martin McKay who is a name drummer who played with all the big bands from Count Basie to Duke Ellington. He was married to America's first female black, jazz pianist. Her name was DeLloyd McKay. She's got records that are collector's items. He does work for the St. Louis Argus and he has played drums with me recently on some recordings. I'm going to give you some of my recordings. He also plays a xylophone and since I have been very active with my newspaper work and my promotions, my piano playing has become more of a hobby. I spend my time in directing young blacks how to entertain. I have a group called the Chick Finney Tomorrow's Stars. I coach them. We were on the radio last weekend. We were on KTVI last Saturday with my Mother of the Year Program. As I said earlier, this is Martin Luther McKay and, tell Mrs. Cortinovis about your earlier experiences with Count Basie. Ask him one or two questions and he will be glad to tell you anything.

CORTINOVIS. Hello, Mr. McKay. I'd like to ask you to add anything you'd like to what Mr. Finney has already told me. I'm doing a paper on music in St. Louis and now I've come to the jazz part. Could you tell us something about yourself and the bands that you played with, please. MCKAY: Oh, with Basie it goes back years ago, 1928, when he first came to Kansas City with a show. They were stranded and nobody wanted to use him, because they didn't

know anything about him. He started playing around with small groups and then he got his own group at Twelfth and Cherry. Benny Moten, and who's the other band now? and Page, the Blue Devils, yeah, that's right. Out of Oklahoma City, that's right. Small groups, six pieces.

CORTINOVIS: So you started playing with Basie in 1928?

MCKAY: WELL, it was the other way around.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, he started playing with you, huh?

MCKAY: Not really started with me, but he did play with me at one time.

CORTINOVIS: In other words, you had a band in Kansas City. What were you playing in Kansas City.

MCKAY: Oh, various clubs, road houses. In those days, there were road houses, you know Prohibition Days.

CORTINOVIS: Speakeasies where you could get liquor.

MCKAY: There you go. Most of them were out in the county. They were called roadhouses out in the county.

CORTINOVIS: THAT'S why they were called roadhouses, wasn't it, because you had to go down the road to get to them?

MCKAY: There you go. that was it.

CORTINOVIS: That was in 1928. What kind of music were you playing then?

MCKAY: OH, I guess that you would classify it as jazz.

CORTINOVIS: And what instrument did you play?

MCKAY: Drums.

CORTINOVIS: How many in the band and what instruments were used?

MCKAY: There were various groupings. Four, six, sometimes twelve. A ten piece band then was three reeds, three brass and four rhythms.

CORTINOVIS: Now I would like to ask you if you ever played in St. Louis?

MCKAY: Not too much at that-time. Just a few clubs.

CORTINOVIS: DID YOU Have a group in Kansas City then?

MCKAY: No, I was with larger bands on the road. With Clarence Love, Lips Page, Denny Carter, Coleman Hawkins and some other bands. In New York.

CORTINOVIS: Did you ever play in Chicago.

MCKAY: No, not much. Mostly in New York and on the road.

CORTINOVIS: And when you were with some of those big bands you were playing drums?

MCKAY: Yes, drums and vibes.

CORTINOVIS: Mr. Finney mentioned something about your wife, could you tell us a little something about her?

MCKAY: She went to Christensen Music Store here and she was on KMOX under Hal Boland.

FINNEY: Here's the thing. Years ago when a new song came out and they wanted to sell it at the ten cents store, they would have some- one playing the piano and someone singing, kind of demonstrating the song, you see.

CORTINOVIS: Did she play jazz piano?

MCKAY: She played every type and one time she went to Europe with Lew Leslie's Blackbirds. A stage production. Ethel Waters toured with them, too.

CORTINOVIS; About what year was that?

MCKAY: About 1931 or 1932.

CORTINOVIS: About the same year that Louis Armstrong went to Europe isn't that right?

FINNEY: But Louis did a lot of work around St. Louis. Did you ever get that for your records? He played on a boat here with Basie, no not Basie, but Fate Marable, Dewey Jackson and others.

CORTINOVIS: Did you ever meet Fate Marable, Mr. Finney?

FINNEY: I knew him personally. He was a jolly fellow. He was a great inspiration to all the young musicians here, because when you talked to Fate, you were talking to a technical man. He could play any song in any key. We admired Fate, because in those days we could only play orchestrations. Fate could play anything and all the boys from across the country would come to visit his boat to hear Fate Marable.

MAKAY: I was going to mention Charlie Creath. I never did know him.

FINNEY; He became known for his clarinet playing and for his trumpet. He was so popular in those days that he had three or four bands under his name and he would go to each job in the vicinity and stay an hour or two to let people know that he was there in person.

MCKAY: When did Charlie pass?

FINNEY: I don't know the year he died. That's a good question and I'll have to look it up. But in Charlie Creath's heyday, they also had Floyd Campbell, Benny Washington and these drummers. In fact, you could say that in those early thirties a drummer was known as a good band leader.

MCKAY: Or sometimes a drummer-singer, you know. Floyd (Campbell) was quite a singer too, you know. I don't know whether Benny sang or not.

FINNEY: Then there was the Chick Webb band. He discovered Ella Fitzgerald. Tap Jordan was another one. In fact Chick Webb discovered the late Johnny Hodges, I just learned. Johnny Hodges left Chick Webb's band and went to the Duke Ellington Band.

CORTINOVIS: I have read that Fate Marable was the first Negro musician to ever lead a band on one of the Streckfus steamers. Do you know about that.

FINNEY: Yes, that's the history behind it. In fact, I've heard that one of the Streckfuses took him under his wing as his son and educated him in music.

CORTINOVIS: This boat that you played on, was that a Streckfus steamer?

FINNEY: The Avalon. No, the Idlewild.

MCKAY: No, it was owned by Henry Meyers of Alton. He works for Streckfus now, I understand.

CORTINOVIS: Did either of you ever work on any boat? Mr. McKay.

MCKAY: Yes, the same one, the Avalon or Idlewild. About 1944, Or 45.

CORTINOVIS: And where did this boat go?

MCKAY: From Joliet, Illinois down to Chattanooga and back.

CORTINOVIS: That's interesting. Because that would be during World War II and I really didn't know that they were still going on the river in those years. What kind of music did you play then?

MCKAY: Oh, commercial.

CORTINOVIS: Not really jazz.

MCKAY: No, you couldn't. We had three or four cruises a day. Morning, afternoon, evening and sometimes, what we called the midnight ramble. So we needed to play dance music.

FINNEY: We couldn't play only jazz, because we had to play for dancing. What I will say about playing on the boat is that it was an institution. You could learn quite a bit, it was really a musical education. We would rehearse all through the day and work at night, see.

CORTINOVIS: Now, this Avalon-Idlewild boat, Mr. Finney, what year did you start on that?

FINNEY: Let's see, must have been about 1934. Course you just read that story that I wrote for the Argus. I came under the banner of the Crackerjacks Band. That band had three herds, I used the word herd in my story there. The first herd was under Eddie Johnson, very active in music. He worked at one of the nightclubs here, now. The second herd was under Winfield Baker and I joined the second herd. When I joined the band I was just a promising pianist, I mean that I hadn't got all my knowledge yet. I mean that I didn't know all my fundamentals like I learned later.

CORTINOVIS: About how old were you?

FINNEY: Oh, I was a teen-ager. But after the band, after I got out of the band business, I went back to taking music all over again, and from the beginning I learned concert pianist, etc. etc. So now I just play now, as I said earlier, as a hobby and to coach and train and develop people. We did have one session with McKay, which was very nice and we made a record which I am going to send you. I'll have to find one in my file for you. The record did receive recognition in some of the trade magazines. But we didn't have the right money behind it. (chuckle).

CORTINOVIS; I would like to ask you about some of your other friends, some of the very well known jazz musicians around St. Louis. For instance, did you ever know Johnny St. Cyr?

FINNEY: I don't know those old musicians, but I know some of the young musicians^ like you just read about John Cotter. You got some of his material. There's Clark Terry, there's Oliver Nelson, there's Floyd Smith and this boy from the Ink Spots, what's his name? Ralph Williams Jimmie Blanton, Tab Smith, Woods from St. Charles. Those are some of the musicians I am well acquainted with, see. That is, I know them by performance, Clark Terry will be here soon, he's gonna make a trip down here to SIU, he's hired on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson.

CORTINOVIS: Oh, yes, I've seen him many times. Now here is list of older musicians that John Cotter has in his book. Do you recognize any of these names?

FINNEY: Well, Boyd Atkins, he was a violin player and he went to Chicago. Irving Randolph, yeh, I remember him, we went to Sumner High School. Earl Carruthers, saxophone, he was with Jimmie Lunsford's band. Henry (Red) Allen, he went with Louis Armstrong. Tab Smith, we mentioned his name already. Floyd Campbell. Eugene Sedric, he was a clarinet player with Fats Waller's Band. Yeh, we remember all those.

MCKAY: Well, Carruthers was from Kansas City, Kansas.

FINNEY: Yeh, from Kansas City. Other names here are Dewey Jackson, Charlie Creath, Joe N_____, Harry Dodd, he's an old time drummer. Walter Sant, he passed last year. Leon Fouts Goodson, he's still here. Tommy_____, a very good saxophone player, he's still here.

CORTINOVIS: And these are the blues singers down here at the bottom of the page. How about those?

FINNEY: Victoria Spivey. I don't know her, but she writes to me all the time.

MCKAY: She's on the road. She still sings. She's recording.

FINNEY: Yeah, I sent her one of my recordings. She liked it.

MCKAY: She did a session just about three months ago, I guess.

FINNEY: Alice Moore, Hazel Meyer, Trixie Smith, Edith Johnson, you should see her for your paper. She's the wife of the late Jesse Johnson. She works in politics doesn't she?

COR: He was a promoter here in town?

FINNEY: Yeah, he was the best, the late Jesse Johnson. His wife is still around and she could fill you in on a lot of information. She works now at the City Hall in one of those offices down there.

COR: I just wonder if I could find her name in the phone book.

FINNEY: I'm pretty sure you could. You could call down there and ask for Miss Geneva Wright, she's a friend of mine. She works in one of the offices down there. She lives right over here on Hampton. I got her address. She might tell you what office Edith Johnson works in. Is this copied from John's book?

COR: Yes, it is. What about this name, Mary Smith?

FINNEY: No, Mary Smith. She don't ring any bells with me.

MCKAY: Was she a blues singer?

COR: Yes and she also recorded on the Okeh Label. She reportedly developed her blues style from association with Lonnie Johnson.

FINNEY: He just passed not so long ago.

COR: Did you know him?

FINNEY: Didn't know him. But I heard that he was a guitar player who skyrocketed, came down and skyrocketed again.

COR: It's true, isn't it, that after jazz weakened, more or less, that there was a revival then in the forties, especially the New Orleans jazz.

FINNEY: We have a fella here named Singleton Palmer, he's a Dixieland Jazz artist. He came from trumpet to tuba and he got his early training with Eddie Johnson, Mose Wallace. Singleton Palmer is still going and he works at most all the private clubs in St. Louis.

COR: Here are some other jazz men who are playing with Singleton Palmer now, at least they were playing with him when this was written.

FINNEY: Where are they, right here? Elijah Shaw, no more with him, Gus Ferryman on

piano, true, Robert Carter turned back to the trumpet, Virden Sender, he's not playing no more. Dewey Jackson, he's passed. he's on the shut-in list. He's ill. he's deceased. Those are the men of his band at the time that Cotter wrote that. I see that you got Eddie Randle. That's a good piece of material, too. Eddie Randle had a band the same time that I had my band. His band was called the Blue Sevils, wasn't it?

MCKAY: That's right.

COR: What were the years that you had your band?

FINNEY: Well, I was popular, with a big band I was popular in 38 and 39.

COR: And where did you play with band?

FINNEY: We hit the road like we was just saying. Most of the jobs was on the road. IN those days it was just mostly one-nighters, it was mostly just interesting experiences, you'd go from one part of the country to another. I got into the band in 34, but I became the head of the band in 35, see. I was leading the band. But I got my experience about 34 with the band.

COR: Did you consider that you played jazz?

FINNEY: Anything that's got a syncopated rhythm was called jazz in those days. And what's this fella, a white band who had so much syncopation ii those days? The Casa Loma Stomp, and several of those bands. Whatever was syncopated was called jazz, see.

COR: Is that your definition of jazz? If it's got a syncopated beat?

FINNEY: No, that's not my definition of jazz. My definition of jazz would run in almost the same vein as the blues, soul; and a beat.

MCKAY: You have to take into consideration improvisation. That's what makes it jazz. Where you depart from straight melodic line and develop your own ideas. That's what makes it jazz.

COR: I have read, especially with Louis Armstrong, that he is able to echo the lead of the singer, or in some cases really replace the singer as the lead. With his instrument.

FINNEY: (to McKay) You want to answer that question?

MCKAY: Yes, I think what she means, in a sense, what's this boy with the Cotton Pickers, he played behind a lot of blues singers.

FINNEY: Wasn't Joe Smith was it? A very good trumpet man, a very good trumpet man. Some people call it obligate.

MCKAY: Not exactly that. They play as part of the background, but it's really important. As you say, it does complement the singer.

COR: Yes, but what I'm trying to determine, since you can see that I am not musical, is what

makes jazz different from other kinds of music?

MCKAY: Oh, ho, that's pretty hard to answer. Because jazz itself is classified on different levels, traditional jazz, hard jazz, modern jazz. But they all have the same basis in that they get away from the straight line.

COR: An experienced musician to make a living would have to play all those kinds, is that right?

MCKAY: That's right. That's right. And even with that, why, it's pretty hard sledding. Most of us do something else. On the side.

COR: Well, the opportunity for these one night stands that you mentioned has been somewhat curtailed, hasn't it ?

MCKAY: Well, I do fairly well playing hotels and weekend spots.

COR: Are you playing now? With your own group?

MCKAY: I have my own group, yes.

(Unfortunately this part of the tape was inadvertently erased. Something went wrong. In this section I questioned Mr. McKay on the question of discrimination against Negro musicians and the amount of mixed white and Negro bands. Now contrary to what is in a good many secondary sources, Mr. McKay and Mr. Finney both testified that, as early as 1928, they played in mixed bands and, that is, bands with both Negro and white musicians. In the case of Mr. McKay playing around Kansas City, in the roadhouses, he told me that the audience was all white. In the case of Mr. Finney, playing around St. Louis, he said that when they played before all-Negro audiences, then the band was all Negro, but when they played before all-white audiences, as on the riverboats, then the band could be mixed. An interesting little side note, I thought, was when Mr. McKay mentioned that it was hard work to play on the boats, because the boats often took three separate cruises during the day. They would have a daytime cruise for families, they would have a tea-dance cruise for couples, and those would both be for white audiences, both the daytime and tea dance cruises and then at midnight very often, especially on weekends they would have another cruise. This would be all-Negro audience and then he said, "And that's when the boat really rocked" I asked them both if they had ever played ragtime or could play ragtime.

They both said yes, although this is considerably before their time. They both said that they liked to fool around and "gig" it a little bit. "Gig is kind of an all purpose word, which they used quite frequently. A gig usually means a date, a recording date, or a playing date. I also asked them which kind of audience they preferred to work before either Negro or white, but they were both much too gentlemanly to state a preference. I tried to get a little more information about their chances of finding employment both in the past and the present. Leading into this again I commented on a recent news item that I had noticed that Local 197 which has always been the Musicians. I'll start over here. In St. Louis, as in many places in the United States, although not every place, there have been separate locals of the American Federation of Musicians and in St. Louis since 1933 the Negro musicians have had their own local. Before that they were refused admittance to the American Federation of Musicians.

So there has long been Local No 2, which was white musicians and Local 197 which was for black musicians. Just recently, January 1, 1971, the two locals have merged and this has meant a raise in scale for the members of Local 197 and it is an accomplishment which Mr. Finney tells me is mostly the work of one man, Elijah J. Shaw, who was very influential in St. Louis music and in the St. Louis local for Negro musicians. He was also nationally known somewhat, played with some of the big bands and he was last playing with Singleton Palmer, but he has now deceased. (Note: Elijah J. Shaw was not dead when this was written or taped). However this is a long over-due step for musicians in St. Louis.)

FINNEY: Mrs. Cortinovis, this is our editor, Al Wallace. (Note; of St. Louis Argus)

COR: How do you do, Mr. Wallace.

FINNEY: He's a great music lover, here get on here. You asked me a question earlier and we might not have given you the right answer. Here, ask a layman who is not a music performer to answer the question. The question, Al, was what do you think you call jazz in comparison to straight music. We gave the answer that jazz gives you a certain feeling, that you take a note and curve it. We were talking about Frank Sinatra and Count Basie. Now you can ask him the question about what he thinks about jazz music.

WALLACE: Well, not being musically inclined, nor a musician, I believe that when you refer to jazz you refer to a certain type of music that is played with a feeling from the musician. When the musician is playing from the heart and is able to get out of it what he is attempting to put into it, it radiates to the audience and they seem to pick up his feeling. It makes you want to tap your foot or clap your hand as he plays his music. Because you feel something that he is trying to say to you and this is the difference between a guy playing music or a guy playing with a little soul in it. People that don't understand or who can't read music, as I said before, you want to clap your hand or stomp you feet to get the beat with him. I think in the jargon of the musicians, you'd say that "he's really cookin'", he's really doin' something with his instrument.

FINNEY: To add on to Mr. Wallace's comments, I'm going to write a story about an arranger. Nowadays, an arranger is just like an artist painting a sign. All the top bands have one or two chief arrangers because they take the straight music and he's got all this kick in him and he knows what to put on the paper and the men can read it. That right, McKay?

MCKAY: He has to maintain the trademark.

FINNEY: Yeah, and as I say, he, the arranger, knows how to do that.

COR: Well, as I was telling Mr. McKay and Mr. Finney, I am interested in the national jazz scene, but I am especially interested in the St. Louis white jazz scene. Except for Ralph Sutton can you think of any other/jazz musicians that you would consider really good musicians?

FINNEY: Yes, what is this boy around here play tenor saxophone?

MCKAY: Bob something.

FINNEY: And we got another young local boy. Herb Drury. An exceptional pianist. And we got another local boy here. Bob Baker, and a local man on TV who plays xylophone, Jim Bohlen. And don't forget Russ David, he's my man.

COR: Do you think that he plays jazz?

FINNEY: Does he? Yeah. And what's this boy plays the banjo they talk about so much? The banjo player, Joe Schirmer.

COR: He plays ragtime too.

FINNEY: Sure he plays jazz. He used to gig around with us.

COR: But ragtime was originally piano music.

FINNEY: Well, it was, see. But they wrote it later for the banjo.

COR: But ragtime was out by the time you started playing.

FINNEY: Well, yeah, it was. But we still have a love for it. They got a club in St. Louis called the St. Louis Jazz Club which plays nothing but ragtime. [wrong]

COR: Have you ever heard Jay Tichenor's band on the Goldenrod?

FINNEY: No, I haven't been down there.

COR: Oh, you should go. That's fun, really fun. They've got the St. Louis Ragtimers down there upstairs on the second floor.

FINNEY: Singleton Palmer is upstairs on the third floor, isn't he?

COR: No, not on the Goldenrod that I know of. The Goldenrod is that show boat that is pulled up at the foot of Washington St. all the time.

MCKAY: I'll tell you a place that used to have a lot of good ragtime, Your Father's Mustache. They've got two banjos, a Dixieland trombone and what not.

COR: WHAT opportunity is there for jazz musicians in St. Louis now?

MCKAY: Oh, it's still a fertile field. I think that there is going to be a transition to a better era that we have had in the past, and then too, with the merger of the locals when they raised the scale. Economically, things are looking up a little bit.

COR: And don't you think that there is more of an interest in live entertainment than there has been?

MCKAY: Oh, yes. But the only problem you have downtown is that people are afraid.

FINNEY: I went to the concert Sunday of Roberta Flack. I was amazed at it because she

didn't have much advance publicity. She had some advance publicity but she didn't have many records because we don't have many jazz stations here. That's my next subject, the jazz djs (disk jockeys). There are only three jazz djs that I know of, that's Bob Monday out of Chicago on KMOX, Spider Burk and Leo Cheer. They are the ones who do the top jazz here and I intend to do a story about that and get their viewpoint like your getting it from me what records are... Of course, you know and I know that records have been a very good boost to the field and to the professional.

MCKAY: What ever happened to the Blue Note Club.

FINNEY: The Blue Note Club? They lost their head man, he died, of a heart attack or something.

MCKAY: It was a good jazz club on the East Side.

INTERRUPTION OF VISITORS

FINNEY: Have you got what you want here?

COR: I think so and I certainly thank you very much. I want to be sure that I got your names right. That's Chick Finney, Chick Finney, and yours Mr. McKay?

MCKAY: M a c K a y, Martin Luther, that's easy.

COR: So you had it before Martin Luther King, huh?

FINNEY: Could I get a copy of this?

COR: SURE, when the students type it off for me, I'll be happy to send you a copy. Or do you mean on tape? Oh, sure, that's easily done.

FINNEY: If I had known that you were going to put this on tape I would have brought my tape recorder with me. I'd like to have both.

COR: All right, fine.. Well, I thank you both very much.